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RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 005972

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SUBJECT: DEMOCRAT PARTY LEADER DISCUSSES COUP AFTERMATH

REF: BANGKOK 5949 (SEPT 27 UPDATE)

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Democrat Party (DP) leader Abhisit Vejjajiva expressed confidence that Council for Democratic Reform (CDR) leader General Sonthi would happily relinquish power, but Abhisit thought the CDR would have difficulty restoring full civil liberties until taking measures against key Thaksin administration figures. In a September 28 discussion with the Ambassador, Abhisit said the prospective selection of Privy Councilor Surayud Chulanont would best enable the withdrawal of the military from political life. Abhisit expressed confidence that his party's image had improved in recent months, but he did not foresee the disintegration of Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party. Nevertheless, Abhisit felt that any significant realignment of politicians would await the promulgation of the interim constitution and the formation of the interim civilian administration. Abhisit also pressed on USG interest in restarting negotiation of a free trade agreement with the interim civilian administration, and he noted former Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwat's availability for the position of UN Secretary General. End Summary.

CONCERNED ABOUT THAKSIN'S SIDE, NOT SONTHI

2. (C) Receiving the Ambassador at Democrat Party headquarters, Abhisit opened the meeting characterizing himself as "concerned" about the current political situation. Abhisit said that, based on his knowledge of General Sonthi's character, he was confident Sonthi had not carried out the September 19 coup in order to put himself in a position of power. However, Abhisit worried that Thaksin loyalists would try reasserting themselves in political life, and this possibility would make it difficult for the CDR to restore full civil liberties. Thaksin's wife, Potjaman, had recently withdrawn 20 million Baht (approximately 540,000 USD) in cash, and some of this money would surely be used to

gain influence with members of the interim government, if not members of the CDR itself. Abhisit surmised that Thaksin loyalists likely had instigated the September 26 burning of schools in Kamphengphet (reftel).

13. (C) Abhisit said that it probably would be necessary for the government to prosecute corrupt Thaksin administration figures, in order to calm the situation sufficiently to allow full restoration of civil liberties. Toward that end, Abhisit requested that the Ambassador provide the CDR with further information about potential irregularities involved in the RTG's purchase from General Electric of CTX explosives detection equipment. If the USG could provide the names of corrupt politicians connected to that purchase, this could provide a basis for further RTG investigation, with a salutary effect on the political environment.

BULLISH ON SURAYUD  
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14. (C) Privy Councilor Surayud Chulanont probably represented the best candidate for interim Prime Minister, Abhisit averred, even though one of the other potential candidates, UN Conference on Trade and Development Secretary General Supachai Panitchpakdi, had longstanding ties to the Democrat Party. Contrasting Supachai's training in economics with Surayud's Army career, Abhisit said that the military probably could not soon "return to the barracks" under an interim Prime Minister with a purely civilian background, like Supachai.

15. (C) Abhisit observed that there was substantial wrangling

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over key elements of the interim constitution. Early drafts had included provisions that would bar members of the CDR, the interim legislature, and the constitutional drafting assembly from seeking political positions for a two-year period. Abhisit thought such provisions would send the right signal. However, lead interim constitution drafter Meechai Ruchuphan had altered those provisions so as to remove any restriction on members of the CDR and most others in the interim government. The Ambassador expressed the importance of the CDR transitioning to a civilian-led government as soon as possible, and doing so in a way that would reassure the international community that the CDR members were not intent on remaining in power.

TRT LIKELY TO REMAIN, BUT DP LOOKING GOOD  
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16. (C) The Ambassador asked Abhisit's view of the future of TRT. Abhisit believed Thaksin's party would remain part of the political landscape. Pending lawsuits that might have resulted in the dissolution of TRT and the Democrat Party (for improprieties in the April 2006 election) would likely become moot now that the CDR had scrapped the 1997 Constitution and the associated legal framework. Some in TRT would be tempted to use the referendum on the next constitution to try to demonstrate popular opposition to the September 19 coup, thereby regaining some political momentum, Abhisit commented.

17. (C) When asked whether he expected an influx of TRT figures into the Democrat Party, Abhisit said most politicians were waiting to see how the constitution and other aspects of the political system would look before making a move. He had been in contact with some TRT figures prior to the coup, and there were some people (NFI) he would like to bring over to the DP if the CDR did not include them in the interim cabinet. But Abhisit was reluctant to sully the DP's image by recruiting TRT figures with tainted reputations, and those who were clean lacked the influence to boost the DP's prospects in a meaningful way.

18. (C) Even before the coup, DP research had shown the

party's image was improving, and not simply because the DP was the principal alternative to TRT. Polling showed the gap between the DP and TRT narrowing from 32 percent to 13 percent. Abhisit claimed a "massive shift" in public perception of the Democrats, who were increasingly seen as having meaningful policies and ideas, caring for the poor, and being responsive to the people's needs. However, Abhisit acknowledged the DP had trailed TRT in terms of projecting strong leadership and an ability to achieve its goals.

¶9. (C) Abhisit lamented the success of the Chavalit administration (in the mid 1990's) in painting the DP as a party of the South and the wealthy. This image persisted to the present day in the Northeast, Thailand's most populous region. Abhisit was more optimistic about gaining strength in central and northern Thailand, noting that, had elections been held in late 2006, he would have anticipated winning four of ten seats in Chiang Mai, Thaksin's home province (where the DP won 18 percent of the vote in 2005). In the northern province of Mae Hong Son, the DP could have won a majority of the seats at stake, Abhisit projected.

¶10. (C) Even assuming TRT's continued existence, it would not be impossible for the DP to win a plurality in the next national election, Abhisit said. The key would be for the vote in the Northeast to be split. Abhisit noted that the Chart Thai party, or even the newly-formed Pracharat Party of former Interior Minister Sanoh Thienthong, might pull a meaningful number of votes from TRT in the Northeast.

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¶11. (C) Abhisit pressed the Ambassador on whether the USG would be able to negotiate a free trade agreement with the interim government. When the Ambassador noted that negotiations had effectively ended once Thaksin dissolved parliament and became caretaker Prime Minister, Abhisit indicated his focus was not on political optics but on legal restrictions. The DP was watching closely the prospects of a U.S.-Thai FTA, Abhisit said, implying that the party might reconsider its previous opposition now that Thaksin's administration would no longer be positioned to profit from the agreement.

SURIN PITSUWAN'S OPTIONS  
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¶12. (C) Abhisit noted that former Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan had been rumored as a potential candidate for Foreign Minister in the soon-to-be-formed interim government. One possible scenario involved the inclusion of both Surin Pitsuwan and former TRT Deputy Prime Minister and Commerce Minister Somkid Jatusripitak in the interim cabinet; this scenario included Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda becoming interim Prime Minister, Abhisit relayed, since Prem had extensive experience dealing with political party figures. Other scenarios even included Surin heading the interim government, Abhisit said, while Surin also had made it clear that he was available for the position of UN Secretary General. Abhisit joked that, while ASEAN candidate

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Surakiart Sathirathai might appear opportunistic in having jumped from Thaksin's camp to the CDR's, this quick shift might demonstrate Surakiart's suitability to become UNSYG, because it showed he could work with all sides in a dispute.

COMMENT  
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¶13. (C) Abhisit appears to be among the many in Bangkok who see the September 19 coup as a necessary step to rid the country of Thaksin. He did not appear particularly troubled

by the current limitations on civil liberties and political party activities, but he clearly anticipated that these would be relaxed in the near future, especially if the CDR were to install an interim Prime Minister capable of controlling the security environment and containing the lingering influence of Thaksin's loyalists.

BOYCE